

WHY RADICAL SELF-CARE CANNOT WAIT: STRATEGIES FOR BLACK WOMEN LEADERS NOW

Shanta M. Smith

Ed.D Candidate, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, CEO and founder of Radical Self-Care 4 Educators LLC

Why Radical Self-Care Cannot Wait

As Black women leaders, we take care of everyone else and we oftentimes fail to adequately take care of ourselves. The prolific author Zora Neale Hurston reiterates this point when she said black women are the “mules of the world” who carry everyone else’s burdens (Hurston, 1937). In light of this relentless reality, as black women leaders we must learn to follow the directions of airline flight attendants who remind us to “put your own oxygen mask on first before giving the mask to others” if we want to survive. What I have learned, both within my practice as a principal and in my dissertation, which focuses on self-care, black women principals and gendered racism, is that learning to care for oneself must be deemed so important that it assumes an urgent and radical nature. Black women must prioritize nourishing our minds, bodies, spirits, and souls through the investigation of self-care strategies that meet our unique needs and stresses. I describe the essence of radical self-care as “When an individual makes the proactive decision to care for oneself by engaging in activities that feed their soul regularly in a manner that changes their lifestyle and allows the individual to prioritize oneself and put self-care needs before others consistently to reduce the impact of stress and combat against stress-related illnesses” (Smith, 2020).

Many black women leaders have difficulty practicing radical self-care in this manner. The demands of work-home balance, the weight of recursive planning in response to the ongoing devastation of dual pandemics, and the conceptualization of the gravity of the impact of our current reality upon us, our families, our loved ones, our employees, our students and their families are stressful, oppressive, and debilitating. It is in these moments that we must safeguard our peace by remaining calm and practicing radical self-care in order to sustain ourselves to continue the work ahead.

Everyone knows that these exponential stressors exist for black women leaders, but many do not recognize that those stressors are mediated powerfully by issues of social identities, structural racism, and broader discrimination that arise from the intersectional identities of black women leaders (Khalifa, Goodin, Davis, 2016; Khalifa, 2018; Smith, 2020). To further compound the matter, research shows that black women have disproportionately higher rates of chronic illness and morbidity. Oftentimes these illnesses are stress related. Scholars McEwen and Stellar (1993) use the term allostatic load to describe a type of chronic stress that causes physical illness when the load is too high. McEwen and Stellar (1993) define high allostatic loads, also called allostatic overload as “the cost of chronic exposure to fluctuating or heightened neural or neuroendocrine response resulting from repeated or chronic environmental challenges that an individual reacts to as being particularly stressful” (p. 2094).

High allostatic loads or allostatic overload occurs when “bad stress” happens too frequently and chronically and, as a result, a person develops so much “wear and tear” on the body and brain from being in a chronically heightened stress state that the body reacts poorly to the stress and begins to break itself down (McEwen & Stellar, 1993). Studies show that Black women have higher allostatic loads in comparison to White women, White men and Black males irrespective of socioeconomic status (Tan, Mamun, Kitzman, Mandapati, & Dodgen, 2017). Moreover, research suggests that “high allostatic load burden partially explains higher mortality among blacks, independent of SES and health behaviors”(Duru, Harawa, Kermah, & Norris, K.C., 2012, p. 89).

Black women leaders, we must work diligently to manage this stress.

Self-Care Strategies for Black Women Leaders

We must take time to deeply pause, critically reflect, and ask ourselves: *What coping strategies do I use when I encounter stress? What self-care strategies or routines have I used? How do I proactively care for myself?* Once you answer these questions, try it for one week as a start, set aside time to plan to radically take care of yourself NOW. As you write your plan, consider this essential question as a critical decision-making element:

How do I develop a radical self-care pathway and daily routine that embraces my epistemology and works for me?

Here are a few strategies and radical self-care activities for you to consider as you consider and craft your plan. These plans are designed to activate what I have termed, P.R.I.C.E. strategies, radical self-care strategies that personalize, radicalize, intentionalize, capitalize and energize your self-care regimen in a manner that meets your individual needs.

1. **Personalize** your self-care by selecting strategies and routines that will benefit YOU. Generate a list of 5 self-care strategies that you enjoy. To begin, select one self-care strategy that you can easily accomplish in a 10 to 15 minutes time frame each day.
2. **Radicalize** your self-care by making it a top priority. Schedule one daily self-care strategy a day into your professional online calendar. Self-care activities that I schedule into my day include meditating, journaling, roller skating, praying or walking around the track. Set an audible alarm 15 minutes before the activity so that you can prepare yourself to engage fully in the activity.
3. **Intentionalize** your plan by reflecting upon and protecting your daily self-care regimen. Review your daily agenda from your online calendar each morning and reflect upon the benefits of the self-care activity that you have selected. Inform your assistant and/or family that you have designated sacred time for you so that you can be the best you for them. Remind them that during this time you should not be disturbed unless there is a true emergency.
4. **Capitalize** your plan by selecting strategies that feed YOUR mind, body, spirit, and soul. Select a self-care strategy that allows you to meet multiple personal needs. For example, thirty minutes of salsa dancing allows me to relax, move my body, connect with others and it brings me joy.
5. **Energize** your plan by infusing radical self-care in your routines to make it a way of life that celebrates you and the lives of other black women. Seek out an accountability partner who is a black women leader to support you with your self-care plan or create a radical self-care group for black women focused on helping each other to create and maintain healthy self-care pathways.

Final Thoughts

As you begin to plan and implement your radical self-care regimen, know that you are adding quality and longevity to your life so that your spirit and strength are magnified for all of the world to see and experience your brilliance. *Activate P.R.I.C.E. strategies- Personalize, Radicalize, Intentionalize, Capitalize and Energize your life today.* It is essential that Black women leaders make a pledge to radically take care of ourselves. Radical self-care cannot wait, our bodies and souls need us to act NOW.

Shanta M. Smith is a doctoral candidate in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. She serves as an elementary school principal in Connecticut and is the CEO and founder of Radical Self-Care 4 Educators, LLC. Her research interests include self-care, gendered racism, educational resistance, and leadership sustainability.

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